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AUTHOR Hinman, Jean S.
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ABSTRACT

The controversy over which books should be included in school reading lists and library shelves is outlined and analyzed. The three standards generally accepted for a "good" book are identified and discussed. The problems which arise in book selection are described, along with the stages of selection and use at which challenges are most likely to arise. Eleven controversial topics are listed. Suggestions for responding to challenges are offered. (SK)

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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO 'GOOD' BOOKS?

Paper presented by Jean S. Hinman, November 15, 1974, at the Roundtable for School and Children's/Young Adult Librarians of the Annual Convention of the Virginia Library Association, held at The Homestead, Hot Springs, Virginia, November 14-16, 1974.

For librarians the topics for today are never far from our minds. We're here to think about controversial books and the handling of censorship problems. I have focused on these matters more than most librarians because I serve on the Intellectual Freedom Committee of the Virginia Library Association and even more because I serve on the Preview and Evaluation Committee of the Fairfax County Public School Libraries. This Committee has several duties and one of them is dealing with questioned or challenged books. I feel that we are fortunate in Fairfax County in having a regularly established procedure for this task. Of course, most challenges or questions are handled within the walls of the school in which they arise, but those which are not are referred to us for review and recommendation.

As I understand my function here today, it is to start us all thinking on our subject, and for that purpose to suggest a few practical aspects or questions to keep in mind when you go into the discussion groups which are the real 'meat' of this afternoon's program. By way of focus, eight titles have been selected: "Mom, the Wolf Man and Me","I'll Get There", "It Better Be Worth the Trip", "Edgar Allan", and "Upstairs Room" will be discussed by the elementary school and children's librarians. Secondary school and young adult librarians are to think about "Go Ask Alice", "The Exorcist", "Manchild in the Promised Land", and "Slaughterhouse Five".

Our subject is certainly a lively one, and very current. You heard the program yesterday afternoon on censorship of books at the publication or pre-publication stage. Recently, the newspapers and TV news programs have been full of stories of book complaints and problems right around us in Virginia, West Virginia, and Maryland. This morning we had a spirited discussion on a proposed resolution to the VLA on this same point. It's all around us and we can't escape it.

After being told we were going to talk about book selection and censorship I was rather startled, at first glance, when I saw the title of this discussion session, "Whatever Happened to 'Good' Books". Then, as I thought about it, I realized that this imaginative and catchy title was simply the other side of the coin; i.e., to call attention to the key issue in book selection and retention questions - when is a book 'good'?

Clearly 'good' is the catch word here - or the 'operative'word, if you please.

Why do people think some books are 'good'?
Why do people think other books are 'not good'?

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And what 'people' are we talking about when we ask these questions?
As librarians we deal with many groups of people:

Other librarians (our easiest group!!)
Children and young people - our clients
The parents of these young people and children
Teachers, school administrators and trustees - our top policy-making bodies.
People in all walks of life and with all levels of education

All of these groups have opinions, frequently very strong and decided, on what constitutes a 'good' book.

Then, how do we recognize a 'good' book? There are as many definitions as there are interest groups, or concerned individuals. For discussion purposes, let me suggest three possibilities:

1. A 'good' book is a classic - one which is old and well-written, has stood the test of time, is venerated by all whether or not they have actually read it. Fine, but is this all we want in our libraries? A library consisting entirely of classics would scarcely be a viable, living library.

2. A 'good' book is one which is safe and non-controversial. It steers clear of unconventional topics or characters, doesn't use earthy language, doesn't offend anyone's beliefs or prejudices. Our libraries (and library staffs) could be much smaller if we followed this principle! They might be small to the point of non-existence. But assuming you could get together a core collection of such books, what would you have? A sterile little group of books which would attract no one to your library - a library of pablum.

3. A 'good' book is one which may not please everyone but has that combination of good writing and important content which makes it useful, valuable - perhaps worthwhile is the best word. I do not mean that a 'good' book need be a perfect book or even an excellent one. A book which has important or relevant or timely content can balance a writing style which is less than remarkable. Conversely, a book with exquisite writing can be worth selection even if the content is less than stellar. I believe that this is what we, as professionals, strive for in book selection, and yet it remains a personal and subjective judgment. This means that we have to be prepared to defend it against criticism and challenge.

It might be useful to think about these difficult questions of book challenges and responses to them from three different angles:

1. What are the types of problems which come up in book selection, censorship, and book challenges? What topics or areas does experience show are the ones most apt to evoke criticism or concern?

2. At what stages in the book selection and use process are these challenges most apt to arise?

3. How can we most effectively and properly respond to these concerns, whether voiced by students, parents, teachers or librarians, administrators or governing boards, or just concerned citizens? And how can the sometimes conflicting views of these different interest groups be balanced or compromised? What practical techniques can we employ to convince critics that their legitimate fears and concerns will get a full and respectful hearing, whether or not they ultimately prevail?

The list of topics that may bother one or another group can get quite long:

1. Sex and pornography. This one is the most familiar and, in some ways, the easiest to dispose of. We're not going to have obviously pornographic books in our libraries, are we? But your definition of pornography may not coincide with someone else's. Sexual allusions and descriptions aren't necessarily pornographic in all cases and may be combined with significant literary merit. In brief, a book you consider 'worthwhile' on balance, even though a bit vivid in spots, may be extremely offensive to someone else.

   For school librarians, there are Virginia Board of Education rules and guidelines on sex education which make the decisions both easier and harder. The limits are intended to be narrower and more definite than for the public libraries. But even schools have a difficult job of media selection. Where does biology end and where does sex education begin? But then, once these difficult selection decisions have been made, you may be surprised to find that the book on sex education is less controversial than the sexual references and allusions in a book which you consider as important literature.

2. Religion, morals, family values. This seems to be at the heart of the disputes in nearby areas mentioned earlier. Theoretically, no one should complain about objective descriptions and comparisons of differing religions, societies, moral and ethical systems and the history and evolution of each, but what may seem 'objective' to the author may be read as strident propaganda by others.

3. Politics, and political organizations and philosophies, domestic and foreign. Here it is hard not to touch a nerve sensitive to someone, particularly in dealing with the extremes of right and left, and foreign systems differing drastically from our own. Yet how does one become educated without exposure to the rich variety of books and magazines on these subjects?

4. Drugs - books about them, books referring to them. It's no use pretending drugs do not exist and are not found attractive, yet how do we educate about them and dramatize their problems without making them seem glamorous?

5. Violence. There are many who consider the portrayal of violence and brutality as more obscene than overt pornography.

6. Gun control. It is important that materials on this subject, both for and against, be in the libraries for youth to study and decide. Yet they may touch raw nerves in the area of public safety and citizen rights.

7. Witchcraft and the occult. What library could be without books on this subject? But we should be prepared for objections.

8. Counter-culture. Books on or referring to the counter-culture or deviant cultures are not so controversial now that some of this is history. Still, they can generate their share of problems.

9. Conservation, environment, ecology. These are subjects on which we must have materials available in our library. Yet just as certainly there are many viewpoints and certain controversy. The same is true of the following two topics and we could go on and on.

10. Women's rights and women's lib.

11. Racial and ethnic minorities, their rights and wrongs, their histories and problems.

Now as to the <u>stages</u> at which these problems and questions of controversy can arise and must be dealt with by you or by someone. I can think of at least four:

1. Censorship in publication. We had an excellent lesson yesterday on the editing, revision, and deletion of books in this stage in our Roundtable discussion of Mr. Marchetti's book "The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence". We now realize there is a whole world of problems out there, but it is not one in which we have any <u>direct</u> input. It is pretty much out of our hands.

2. Selection of books, magazines, and audio-visual materials. This is a stage at which we have important input. What we order for our libraries is a major professional decision.

3. Use and placement of materials. This is another important part of our job. Are some of our materials limited or restricted when it comes to access or use? Are some used only under teacher guidance? Or are all our library materials on open shelves for unrestricted use? It is during this period of usage that questions, controversy, or challenges of library materials may arise. We need to be prepared to defend our choices or these materials may be removed or their use pattern altered.

4. Weeding. Again this calls for professional judgment. Censorship in weeding is all too common. It is perhaps more difficult

to weed objectively than it is to select objectively.

Finally, how do we respond to these problems? What are the best and most useful techniques to employ in selecting, using, and weeding library materials? What are the most effective responses to challenges? Here are a few suggestions, if not solutions.

Do keep in mind that you are not alone out there. Many librarians have wrestled with this problem and have given us written policies and aids. Remember the resources of the American Library Association. Keep posted their Library Bill of Rights and School Library Bill of Rights. Also, they can give you sample selection policies or Freedom to Read publications. Then there is the National Council of Teachers of English. Their pamphlet "The Students' Right to Read" has many practical aids including step by step procedure to handle complaints. Don't forget the professional selection aids and reviewing sources. Use them both for guidance and protection.

Other possible helps include exchanges of information on problems and techniques, as we are about to do here today. Should we do it more frequently? On a local or regional scale as well as statewide?

I hope these ideas will give focus to your discussion groups which follow immediately.

JSH:vmk

Jean S. Hinman, Head Librarian
Fort Hunt High School (Fairfax County)
8428 Fort Hunt Road
Alexandria, Virginia 22308